



## **Career Commitment of Postprofessional Athletic Training Program Graduates**

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**No Abstract**

**Ashley Goodman**, Stephanie Mazerolle, Thomas Bowman (2015) "Career Commitment of Postprofessional Athletic Training Program Graduates" *Journal of Athletic Training* 50(4):426–431[doi: 10.4085/1062-6050-49.3.69] Version of Record available from [www.natajournals.org](http://www.natajournals.org)

# Career Commitment of Postprofessional Athletic Training Program Graduates

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**Context:** Choosing to pursue an advanced degree in athletic training appears to indicate professional commitment and passion for the profession. Currently, there is a paucity of information regarding why some athletic trainers pursue enrollment in a postprofessional athletic training program (PPATP), indicating commitment to the profession, but later depart for another primary role outside of athletic training.

**Objective:** To understand why athletic trainers invested in advanced training via a PPATP but then decided to leave the profession.

**Design:** Qualitative study.

**Setting:** Online data collection.

**Patients or Other Participants:** Twelve graduates (8 women [67%], 4 men [33%], age =  $31.58 \pm 3.06$  years) from PPATPs who no longer had primary employment as an athletic trainer.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** Recruits responded to an e-mail invitation to participate by completing a confidential online questionnaire. We analyzed data using a general inductive

approach and secured trustworthiness using multiple-analyst triangulation, peer review, and member checks.

**Results:** Two higher-order themes emerged regarding the career commitment of former athletic trainers who were PPATP graduates: (1) *departure from an athletic training career* and (2) *partial continuance in athletic training*. Two second-order themes emerged from the reasons for departure: (1) *decreased recognition of value* and (2) *work-life imbalance*. Finally, we identified 2 third-order themes from the participants' reasons for departure because of a perceived lack of value: (1) *low salary* and (2) *long, inconsistent hours worked*.

**Conclusions:** Most of our participants intended to stay in the profession when they chose to attend a PPATP. However, during role inductance in either the clinical experience of the PPATP they attended or early in their careers, they began to have thoughts of leaving mainly because of inadequate financial compensation, challenging work schedules, or both.

**Key Words:** retention, attrition, career inductance

## Key Points

- Despite their initial intentions to remain in the profession, athletic trainers who departed cited low salaries and long, inconsistent hours as the main factors in their decisions.
- Also influencing the decision to leave athletic training were decreased perceived value as a health care provider and work-life imbalance.

On graduation from a Commission on Accreditation of Athletic Training Education–accredited athletic training program, many athletic training students (ATs) opt to pursue a graduate degree, as indicated by the nearly 70% of all athletic trainers (ATs) who possess a master's degree.<sup>1</sup> The decision to pursue a graduate degree is often fostered by the ATs's desire to gain additional mentorship and training before assuming a full-time position as an AT.<sup>2</sup> Diversity exists, however, in the graduate degrees sought by ATs, which can include biomechanics, exercise science, physical therapy, sports or business administration, or athletic training.<sup>2</sup>

Choosing to pursue an advanced degree in athletic training appears to indicate professional commitment and passion for the profession.<sup>3</sup> Professional commitment is commonly designated by the strength of an individual's identification with, and involvement in, a profession.<sup>4</sup> Many factors affect one's professional commitment; rewards, coworker support, and love of the job can

positively influence that commitment,<sup>5</sup> whereas organizational climate, low salary, and limited staffing can negatively influence it.<sup>6</sup> Long-term professional goals that include a career in athletic training and pursuit of advanced skills in athletic training provide the experience necessary to reach that goal.<sup>3</sup> Many factors contribute to the initial attraction of a degree from a postprofessional athletic training program (PPATP),<sup>2,3</sup> but the opportunity to gain formal socialization through a clinical assistantship appears to be a strong attractor for the ATs and can have a strong influence on the final selection of a graduate program and degree.<sup>3</sup> Completion of a PPATP provides the AT with the chance to gain clinical autonomy while being mentored in a learning environment that helps develop an expert clinician.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, unlike the traditional graduate assistantship position, which is modeled as an apprenticeship, attendance at a PPATP allows the AT to acquire advanced skills in athletic training while continuing to develop clinical competence. The choice to enter a PPATP may

**Table 1. Participants' Demographic Information**

| Participant Pseudonym | Time as Athletic Trainer, y | Marital Status | Age, y | Current Career                                |
|-----------------------|-----------------------------|----------------|--------|---|
| Amanda                | 1                           | Single         | 25     | Nurse   |
| Amy                   | 4                           | Married        | 32     | Manual care/rehabilitation office owner       |
| Ashley                | 10                          | Married        | 37     | Family practice office manager                |
| David                 | 3                           | Married        | 34     | Physician assistant                           |
| Emily                 | 5                           | Married        | 32     | Health and physical education teacher         |
| Jessica               | 4                           | Single         | 30     | Nurse   |
| Kim                   | 9                           | Married        | 34     | Federal Bureau of Investigation special agent |
| Melissa               | 5                           | Married        | 32     | Stay-at-home mother                           |
| Mike                  | 2.5                         | Single         | 33     | Physician assistant                           |
| Paul                  | 6                           | Single         | 32     | Nurse   |
| Rachel                | 3                           | Married        | 29     | Physician assistant                           |
| Steve                 | 4                           | Married        | 29     | Physician assistant                           |

indicate a strong interest in the material, the desire to advance an entry-level skill set, and the intention to pursue a career in athletic training.

As demonstrated in a recent study,<sup>7</sup> ATs entering PPATP education were motivated to pursue careers in athletic training. This finding supports the research of Mazerolle and Dodge,<sup>3</sup> who found that first-year ATs enrolled in PPATPs were motivated to pursue full-time athletic training positions after graduation. Despite the clear link between attending a PPATP and retention in the field, it appears many ATs may leave the profession of athletic training after completing their postprofessional athletic training degrees. The topic of retention within athletic training has received attention recently, as the profession looks to solidify its role in health care and the medical community. Although the literature is rich with information on retention and factors associated with it,<sup>7-10</sup> there is a paucity of information regarding why athletic trainers make the decision to pursue a degree from a PPATP, indicating commitment to the profession, but later depart for another primary role outside of athletic training. Consequently, the purpose of our investigation was to understand why ATs invested in advanced training via a PPATP but then decided to leave the profession. We were specifically concerned with which factors led to their departure, what they were currently doing professionally, and whether they had any plans to return to athletic training.

## METHODS

We used qualitative methods with an online response medium to allow the participants flexibility and a high level of confidentiality when responding to our questions.<sup>11</sup> Qualitative methods also enabled us to gather rich descriptions of the participants' experiences in their PPATPs and their careers in athletic training. Furthermore, we felt a flexible data-collection method, in which the participant can choose his or her own answer, would allow us to record a holistic appreciation of the participants' thoughts, leading to a more robust understanding of why they later left the profession of athletic training.

## Participants

We recruited 12 participants (8 women [67%], 4 men [33%], age =  $31.58 \pm 3.06$  years) who had graduated from a PPATP but who no longer held positions primarily as ATs. Our participants reported working as ATs for an average of  $4.71 \pm 2.60$  years (range, 1–10 years) before moving on to different positions. Most of the participants ( $n$

= 8; 67%) were married; 33% ( $n = 4$ ) were single. Three participants (25%) had children. Four participants (33%) were currently employed as physician assistants and 3 (33%) worked as nurses. Other professions represented were the manager of a family practice office, stay-at-home mother, owner and clinician at a manual care and rehabilitation office, Federal Bureau of Investigation special agent, and high school health and physical education teacher. Detailed demographic information on the participants is provided in Table 1.

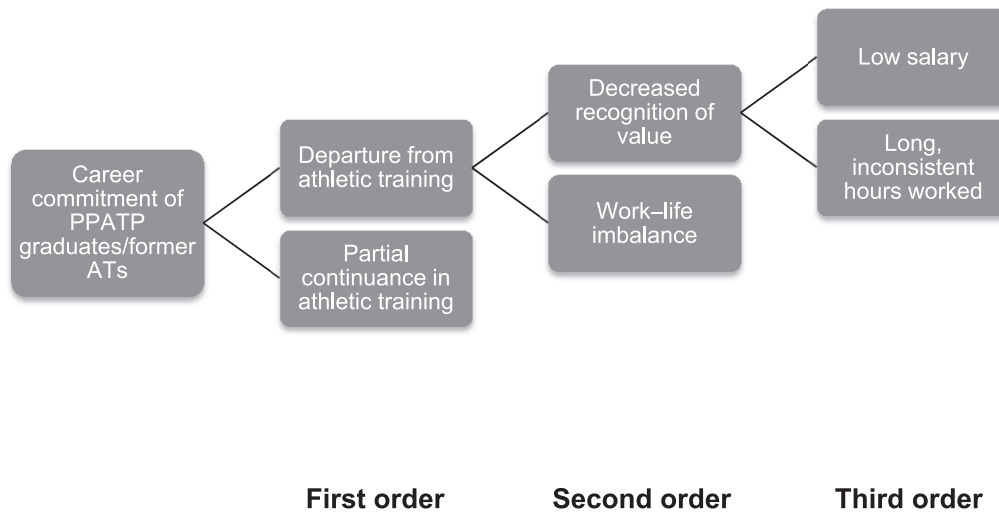
## Data-Collection Procedures

Before data collection began, we obtained institutional review board approval from the host institution. From our professional networks, we formulated a list of e-mail addresses for PPATP graduates who had primary jobs outside athletic training. Using the e-mail addresses provided, we sent recruitment e-mails explaining the purpose of our study to 18 professionals meeting our inclusion criteria: (1) graduation from a PPATP and (2) currently holding a primary role outside athletic training. We provided participants with a link to a secure, Web-based, data-collection site via QuestionPro (QuestionPro, Inc, Seattle, WA), which contained the questionnaire. The first part of the questionnaire consisted of demographic questions. The second part contained several open-ended questions aimed at providing answers to our primary research questions (see Table 2 for examples of open-ended questions). The participants typed their responses in the space provided, which allowed for an unlimited number of characters. In the introductory script to the survey, we also

**Table 2. Examples of Questions Included in the Questionnaire**

1. What were your career goals when you decided to attend a postprofessional athletic training program?
2. Did your career goals change? If yes, when?
3. Why did your career goals change?
4. What factors led you to leave the profession of athletic training?
5. When you decided to pursue your postprofessional athletic training program, did you have intentions of remaining in athletic training? Explain.
6. What changed, causing you to consider leaving?
7. Are you still involved in the profession of athletic training?
8. Explain what role you play in the profession?
9. Do you currently maintain the ATC credential or NATA membership?

Abbreviations: ATC, athletic training certification; NATA, National Athletic Trainers' Association.



**Figure.** Emergent themes from the career commitment of postprofessional athletic training program (PPATP) graduates who have left the athletic training profession. Abbreviation: ATs, athletic trainers.

explained that we might contact participants for additional information or for clarity via e-mail or telephone (or both). A peer who was experienced in qualitative methods and athletic training professional retention reviewed our questionnaire for content and clarity before we administered it to our participants.

To improve the response rate and reach data saturation, we sent 3 reminder e-mails approximately 2 weeks apart to those who had not responded. Recruitment was terminated when we reached saturation, which occurred at 12 participants. To maintain confidentiality, we provided the participants with pseudonyms before data analysis.

### Data Analysis

We used a general inductive approach to analyze the data.<sup>12</sup> We chose this approach because its purpose is to condense diverse raw text into a summary of key findings. The process was also driven by our research questions, allowing clear links to the results. First, the 2 lead authors (T.G.B., S.M.M.) continually read the transcripts during data collection to examine the data for saturation. Once we finalized recruitment and data collection, we began to review the data and assign labels to the data on a line-by-line basis. On subsequent readings of the data, we condensed labels into categories to reduce concept redundancy. Finally, we further reduced concept overlap by collapsing the categories into the dominant, emerging themes.

We secured credibility of our work through 3 separate processes. First, the primary and secondary authors analyzed the data independently. The 2 authors have extensive experience in qualitative methods and socialization and retention in athletic training. Once the analysis was complete, the researchers discussed the coding scheme. Negotiations took place over the terminology of the final themes, but we obtained agreement on the content of the final themes. Second, a peer reviewed (1) the questionnaire before administration, (2) the transcripts, (3) our coding structure, and (4) the presentation of the results to check for content validity (questionnaire), methodologic rigor, and appropriate reporting. The peer was an athletic training

educator with extensive research experience in the areas of socialization and retention and attrition. Finally, 2 randomly selected participants completed member checks: the participants were provided with their transcripts to validate the accuracy of their responses to the questionnaire. We also shared the final report with these participants to convey the results for comprehensiveness and truthfulness.

### RESULTS

We identified 2 higher-order themes from the data on the career commitment of former ATs with a PPATP degree: (1) *departure from an athletic training career* and (2) *partial continuance in athletic training*. Departure from a career in athletic training was defined by 2 second-order themes: (1) *decreased recognition of value* and (2) *work-life imbalance*. Finally, the decreased recognition of value theme was further described by *low salary* and *long, inconsistent hours worked*. The Figure provides a visual description of our findings. All themes will be defined and illustrated with supporting participant quotes.

#### Departure From Athletic Training

Departure from the profession was predicated on the perception that participants experienced a decreased recognition of their value as health care professionals; specifically, they did not receive adequate financial compensation for their services or the hours they worked were long and inconsistent (or both). Those 2 concerns, categorized as third-order themes, were commonly intertwined, because many participants noted both simultaneously. Several participants discussed reasons for departing the profession by explaining the disconnection between compensation and the amount of service provided. For example, Kim considered changing careers because “I felt I was becoming stagnant in my role as a high school AT and just tired of always having to fight over salary, [over] how many classes I would need to teach, etc.” Jessica agreed: “I was working 7 days a week with little consideration from the athletic staff and little pay. There were not many job opportunities for a location change.”

When asked later if the factors that led her to leave the athletic training profession could change, she said

They could change, but I don't see it happening. Until athletic staff respect[s] the AT staff and respect[s] the fact that even though 1 team is off, others are still practicing, and the athletic trainer is always working, there will be no change. Athletic trainers do need time off as well. We do eat, sleep, and yes, even do laundry. The big picture needs to be understood when working at a college.

Mike "became tired of working evenings, weekends, and holidays." Similarly, "the hours and the fact that your schedule is always dependent on the decision of others—coaches, practice schedules, game schedules, etc"—caused Ashley to consider leaving a career as an AT.

Paul also combined the themes. His career goals changed because

I loved working as an AT, but I decided that it would be difficult to continue to work in that capacity simply due to the long hours, low pay, and high burnout rate. I would have continued if these issues were not such a large factor. My career goals then focused on learning more to become better at diagnosis and treatment. Then my goal would be to work in an office setting independently where I could better control my pay and hours.

Being underappreciated was discussed by many of our participants as influential in their departure. For example, Steve commented, "For as hard as we worked, we were greatly underappreciated. Compensation has yet to catch up with the responsibility, physical, and mental demand that is placed on the certified athletic trainer." He went on to say, "[Athletic trainers are] underappreciated. I don't think enough people know who we are and what it is exactly that we do. I think this is slowly improving. Again, compensation is also an issue." Jessica's reflections and experiences corroborate the concern raised by Steve and other participants. "Working 45 days straight with no respect or appreciation from staff" led her to leave the profession. Rachel summed these points up concisely. She left because she "desired a more consistent schedule, better salary, more controlled environment, and a more respected and understood profession."

The second-order theme of *work-life imbalance* reflected the participants' realization that balancing the demands of an AT and a family would be difficult. When asked what changed to cause them to consider leaving the profession after completing their PPATP, more than half the participants (n = 7; 58%) stated they always intended to stay in athletic training. David explained,

After getting married to another AT, we realized that it would be virtually impossible to start having children and have any kind of stability with us both working crazy hours, traveling, and poor pay. One of us had to do something more stable, so we could have a family.

Melissa also mentioned that her significant other's profession made it difficult for her to continue to work as

an AT: "My husband is a coach at a DI [Division I] program, so with his schedule and traveling, it was better if I stayed home with the kids." She noted that her "husband's job and mine conflicted. Our kids needed some schedule stability. And we were able to let me stay home financially." Finally, Emily cited her desire to have a more consistent schedule, which would allow her to have a family. She said, "I couldn't get a college job, so I was working at a high school. I didn't want to work those hours, and I wanted to get married and start a family." The decision to start a family appeared to influence retention in the aftermath of pursuing a career.

### Partial Continuance in Athletic Training

Many of our participants (n = 7; 58%) had intended to remain in an athletic training position. Steve remarked, "Yes, I did have intentions on staying. I always wanted to remain close to ATs. I still work with them daily. I wear AT on my white coat." Jessica shared a similar experience. When asked if she had intended to find a career in athletic training and stay in the profession, she answered, "Yes. I liked the education material and enjoyed being outside at games and helping patients." David held a similar opinion: "Absolutely. At the time, I had thought I wanted to work DI [Division I] athletics forever."

Seven participants (58%) were still involved in the athletic training profession. Amanda explained, "I keep my license in [state name] current and active. If a need for an athletic trainer arose in my area, I would be more than happy to help out in varying ways." Emily also worked as an AT from time to time. She described, "I have helped with coverage and still evaluate some acute injuries to help out our current high school athletic trainer." Two participants covered summer camps. Melissa stated, "I work some camps in the summer time and help out here and there if I can." Rachel also remained involved in several other ways. She

maintains her athletic training license and CEUs [continuing education units], works at a university setting and sees athletes in a clinic, communicates with ATs on a regular basis about patient care, and works as an AT for summer sports camps on an as-needed basis.

Finally, Paul remained involved in athletic training "not officially, but I maintain my ATC credential and I work with local ATs on a referral basis." An additional 3 participants (25%) who replied *no* keep their certification current. When asked whether she was still involved in athletic training, Ashley responded, "No, but I would like to become involved at my local high schools for any ATs needing extra help." Amy said, "Not at the moment, but my certification is, and will remain to be [sic], current." One participant (8%) no longer held Board of Certification, Inc (Omaha, NE) certification.

Interestingly, only 5 (42%) of the participants would not consider a full-time return to athletic training. The remaining 7 (58%) would but only if the terms were favorable. For example, Rachel had specific requirements for a return to athletic training: "Yes. If the following conditions could be met: work at a DIII [Division III] college, work 40 [to] 45 hours per week, and make over

\$65 000 a year.” Paul agreed, “I would gladly accept a job in an athletic training position if the terms were right.”

## DISCUSSION

Much of the attention given to retention and attrition in athletic training has focused primarily on students or the ATs still employed within the profession.<sup>7–10</sup> Although that information is critical, learning about the opinions and experiences of those who have left the profession is equally necessary to fully appreciate their reasons. Our study is unique, as it is one of the first, to our knowledge, to examine departure reasons from a group who initially demonstrated professional commitment and long-term goals within the athletic training profession, as evidenced by completion of a PPATP, yet later decided to leave.

A perceived lack of value, respect, and understanding of the AT's professional and personal lives was a primary reason our participants ended their full-time careers in athletic training. Coaches and administrators who influence work schedules and control salaries and staffing are at the crux of this conflict and have been previously reported as affecting the establishment of work-life balance for the AT, a known retention factor.<sup>9,13–15</sup> The lack of perceived value or worth of an AT has been a long-standing concern in the profession. This negative perception has led ATs and the National Athletic Trainers' Association to advocate for, and develop documents that can, assist ATs in the college or university setting<sup>16</sup> or the secondary school setting<sup>17</sup> in maintaining or improving their professional positions by quantifying their worth to their organizations.

Our results continue to illustrate the lack of value and negative effects of low salaries and long hours worked on professional commitment and longevity for the AT. Compensation and the amount of time involved in work activities were reasons senior ATs considered leaving athletic training and reasons recent graduates left the athletic training profession.<sup>2,18</sup> Similarly, current PPATP students also listed compensation as a drawback to entering the athletic training profession and showed concern over future work-life balance, especially once they consider starting a family.<sup>19</sup> For our participants, the problem appeared to be an imbalance between pay and the numbers of hours worked, not necessarily 1 factor independent of the other. Perhaps our participants would be satisfied working the long hours required for their positions if they received additional compensation. Or they might be satisfied with their salaries if they could commit less time to work. These former ATs had intended to stay in the profession; however, additional role inductance during graduate school or as young professionals led them to think of leaving the profession. Although low salaries and work-life imbalance continue to be points of contention and barriers to longevity in an athletic training career, salaries appear to be improving.<sup>20</sup>

Work-life imbalance has been reported as a departure reason before. It was initially perceived as a concern for female ATs,<sup>9</sup> but male ATs also make career changes based on meeting family needs.<sup>21</sup> Our results support previous findings<sup>9,21</sup> that conflicts between professional responsibilities and personal interests and family needs are frequent in athletic training and facilitate departure. It is important to discuss the work-life balance concerns that develop once an

AT acquires a significant other or begins planning a family. The life-span theory can be relevant for ATs because it suggests that as individuals navigate their life course, their attitudes, goals, and behaviors change and evolve.<sup>22</sup> It is possible that during educational training and development, the novice AT is committed to a lifelong career in athletic training because planning for a family is not a primary focus or concern. We know that female ATs have intentions to remain in the profession but are also not concerned with family needs or planning because it is viewed as a future goal.<sup>23</sup> However, recent graduates express concern over having time for future family responsibilities.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps thoughts of family life arise near completion of the undergraduate degree and heighten during and after graduate school.

Interestingly, despite the dissatisfaction our participants had with compensation and the number of hours they worked, almost all of them were interested in maintaining some level of involvement in athletic training. All but 1 (11 of 12; 92%) of the former ATs we spoke with maintained their status with the Board of Certification. Several worked either as needed at high schools or covered summer camps, whereas others saw patients and used their skills, although their primary titles did not include AT. One participant (8%) is a cochair of an athletic training state association committee and has spoken several times at different athletic training conferences. We believe these former ATs continue to have some level of commitment to the athletic training profession even though they left the profession for a different career. This suggests that they are passionate about the profession, yet they desire careers that provide more consistent hours and pay that reflects the work they complete.

Based on the findings of the current study, we recommend the National Athletic Trainers' Association continue to raise awareness of the benefits of ATs in an effort to improve salaries and working conditions. Athletic trainers could use those findings to assist them in evaluating their current and future employment conditions, whereas athletic training faculty and staff could help educate ATs on how to evaluate potential employment opportunities through the lenses of value and work-life balance. Our hope is that these efforts will eventually lead to improved work-life balance for ATs, potentially increasing professional retention.

## Limitations and Future Directions

Although we believe our findings are noteworthy, our study had limitations. Most notably, as is common with qualitative studies, our sample size was small, limiting the generalizability of our findings. Data saturation guided recruitment and helped provide substance to our findings, yet our data may not represent all who left the field after attending PPATPs. We do, however, believe our study was an important step in uncovering the reasons professionals committed to the athletic training profession decide to leave to explore other options. We also used an online medium for data collection that is void of researcher and participant interaction. Although we were able to contact participants for elaboration and clarification, a telephone or in-person interview might have yielded more robust data. Our study only provides the insights and perspectives of those who



have left the profession after completing a PPATP. Future researchers are encouraged to explore departure reasons from additional former ATs, including those who attended other programs of graduate study. Future investigators should also focus on others involved in mentoring professionals, such as PPATP program directors and athletic training faculty. Furthermore, researchers should examine the implementation of the College-University Value Model<sup>16</sup> and the Position Improvement Guide for Secondary School Athletic Trainers<sup>17</sup> and their effect on the improvement of AT salaries, workloads, staffing, and job satisfaction.

## CONCLUSIONS

Most of our participants intended to stay in the athletic training profession when they chose to attend a PPATP. However, during role inductance, either during the clinical experience of the PPATP they attended or early in their careers, they began to have thoughts of leaving mainly because of the perceived lack of professional value. Inadequate financial compensation and long, inconsistent work hours were primary factors for departure. The prospect of starting a family also influenced career changes, often because of the desire to have more continuity in work schedules or financial stability to support one's family. Despite these feelings, most of our participants remained active in athletic training to some degree.

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